

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Consumer
Education

Meat and
Poultry Hotline
Staff

aTX612
.M4M4

Looking Back to the Future

How Analysis of Consumer Inquiries Shaped Food Safety Education

Document Delivery Services Center
U.S.A. National Agricultural Library
Nat. Bldg.
10501 Baltimore Blvd.
Beltsville, MD 20715-2631



Contents

The Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1990-1991	1
Fourth Quarter 1990	3
Influence of Hotline Felt Half a World Away	3
Holiday Season Once Again Hotline's Busiest	3
Statistical Summary	4
Call Volume	4
Audiences Reached	5
Callers' Home States	5
Source of the Tollfree Number	5
Types of Inquiries	5
Subjects of Inquiry	5
Foods of Interest	6
Call Management	6
1991: The Year in Review	7
Nutrition Education Now Part of Hotline Mission	7
Callers Contribute to Food Labeling Reform	8
Important Food Safety Issues	8
Safely Sending Food Gifts	8
Broiler Inspection	9
Foodborne Illness	9
Holiday Season	10
Statistical Summary	10
Call Volume	10
Audiences Reached	10
Callers' Home States	12
Source of the Tollfree Number	12
Types of Inquiries	13
Subjects of Inquiry	13
Foods of Interest	14
Call Management	15
Hotline Operations	17
Staffing	17
Administration	17
Staff Training	18
Media Relations	18
Other Outreach Efforts	19
Conclusion	21
Meat and Poultry Hotline Staff	23

U.S.D.A., NAL
MAY 24 2002
Cataloging Prep

The Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1990-1991

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is a consumer education service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA/FSIS). A primary goal of the hotline's food safety education program is to help consumers reduce the incidence of foodborne illness through proper food handling.

The home economists and registered dietitians answering the tollfree hotline telephones are experts in food safety and nutrition. They handle calls on safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat and poultry products, emphasizing appropriate actions that will help lower the risk of foodborne illness. The hotline also answers questions on labeling, food additives, meat inspection, and related topics. In addition, the staff answers nutrition questions based on the **Dietary Guidelines for Americans**, the foundation for all Federal nutrition education programs for healthy Americans. These guidelines help consumers select meat and poultry products wisely, so that when safely prepared, the foods offer the fullest possible health benefit.

The hotline takes a comprehensive approach to food safety education. Direct telephone contact with consumers enables hotline food safety specialists to identify areas in which consumer education is needed. The hotline staff is actively involved in the development and dissemination of print and audiovisual materials that teach safe food handling.

This report covers the 15-month period beginning October 1, 1990 and ending December 31, 1991, during which the hotline received 131,000 calls. Of this number, hotline food safety specialists actually talked to 56,000 people during business hours. The questions and concerns of those callers are analyzed in this report. (After hours, callers hear recorded food safety messages).

"This period in hotline history may be characterized as 'proactive,'" according to Susan Conley, hotline manager. "The Meat and Poultry Hotline accurately anticipated needs for consumer education and formulated practical advice to meet those needs." The hotline enjoyed unprecedented success in its role as a consumer response system, addressing the food safety questions for thousands of families mailing foods to troops serving in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Also, as FSIS' liaison with the public, the hotline collected caller comments on the first major food labeling revisions proposed in two decades. In anticipation of these labeling changes, the hotline staff united with other USDA agencies to strengthen the Department's nutrition education initiatives.

Fourth Quarter 1990

Influence of Hotline Felt Half a World Away

November 1990 turned out to be the busiest month in hotline history, not only due to the Thanksgiving holiday, but also to an enormous influx of calls on sending food gifts to troops serving in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Never had so many callers asked about one single issue in so brief a timespan.

Soon after the first troops were deployed overseas, a few consumers began calling the hotline to be sure that the foods they intended to mail loved ones would arrive in good condition. This indicated that the hotline's continuing effort to help consumers choose wisely when purchasing meat and poultry from mail order houses—or mailing gifts themselves—would take a new direction in 1990.

To address these concerns about mailing food, recalled senior hotline home economist Bessie Berry, “we worked with USDA food scientists, the military, embassies, and the U. S. Postal Service to come up with do's and don'ts for holiday food packages. The November 1 press release summarizing the advice triggered a flood of calls from all corners of the Nation.”

Before year's end, the hotline staff spoke to 1,400 callers on this issue. Many more benefited from media coverage and recorded messages. Consumers asked what foods would travel well, how to package and wrap the items adequately, and how Saudi religious and cultural requirements would affect their choices. In response, the hotline suggested the least perishable gift alternatives, cautioned against mailing unsuitable foods (callers suggested everything from smoked turkeys to ice cream), and referred callers to appropriate agencies when their concerns for the troops went beyond safe food handling.

Holiday Season Once Again Hotline's Busiest

Despite this intense interest in mailing food gifts, questions on other seasonal food safety issues continued at a steady pace. Most of those calling during the quarter asked how to safely handle and prepare turkey. Some trouble spots for cooks included smoking turkeys

safely, understanding why prestuffed birds create food safety problems, and finding safer alternatives to reheating whole, cooked turkeys.

Registered dietitian Patricia Moriarty declared, "The theme of FSIS' 1990 holiday campaign, 'A Procrastinator's Guide to a Safe Thanksgiving,' was well received by consumers and the media and addressed many of the concerns noted by the hotline staff the previous year." Its message, said Moriarty, was that food safety need not be compromised when time runs short.

The desire to save time was at the root of many food safety problems, according to the hotline's Sara Beck. Consumers chose unsafe methods to thaw frozen turkeys quickly. Others purchased fresh turkeys far in advance, risking food spoilage. Even more critical food handling errors included partial cooking of meat or poultry (often accompanied by improper cooling) and cooking at too low an oven temperature. "The hotline's ability to intervene in these cases reduced the risk of foodborne illness for these callers—and their families," Beck said.

Although turkey is gaining in popularity, many callers said they serve whole turkeys infrequently. This helped explain confusion regarding pop-up timers, the location of giblet packets, and whether certain packaging materials could withstand the heat of the oven.

Other meat and poultry items served by callers on special occasions were rack of lamb, crown roast of pork, standing rib roasts, and game birds. Callers had questions on final internal temperatures, approximate cooking times, and tests for doneness.

Concern regarding Salmonella enteritidis predictably rose during the holiday season when more callers were making eggnog and icing gingerbread houses. Certified home economist CiCi Williamson observed, "Interest in refrigerated, frozen, and dried pasteurized eggs as alternatives to shell eggs has intensified over the past few years."

Statistical Summary

Call Volume

Between October 1 and December 31, 1990, the hotline received nearly 36,000 calls. Approximately 14,000 callers spoke with hotline food safety specialists during regular business hours. "These data show that a growing number of callers chose the off-peak hours and took advantage of recorded food safety messages," noted veteran staff member Marianne Gravely. "This was one reason we decided to expand the hotline's telecommunications system," she added. This upgrade was completed in 1992.

As in past years, November was the busiest month for the hotline (19,500 calls) and operating hours were expanded for the fifth year. The number of calls increased 21 percent over 1989 levels.

Audiences Reached

The hotline continued to fulfill its primary mission, providing food handling information to consumers. A number of specialized groups, accounting for 8 percent of calls, were served as well. The hotline served as a resource for the mass media, students and teachers, government officials, citizen interest groups, and members of the business and professional community. Contact with these group leaders facilitated the distribution of food safety information to a much wider audience.

Callers' Home States

Historical trends for the hotline remained the same. While calls came from all 50 States, most of the calls came from the Eastern United States. New York and California, at 10 and 9 percent of calls respectively, were the best represented. Ranked third, fourth, and fifth were Illinois, Ohio, and Florida.

Source of the Tollfree Number

New callers learned of the hotline primarily through magazines and newspapers. More than 1,500 newspapers with a combined readership of 30 million carried articles which mentioned the Meat and Poultry Hotline. A major food safety story in the December 1990 "Reader's Digest" topped the list of magazine placements. Radio, television, and USDA's Extension Service were other important avenues by which consumers learned of the hotline.

Types of Inquiries

Requests for information far outnumbered complaints about a particular food. Only 170 consumer contacts, fewer than 1 percent of those recorded, were classified as complaints. Just 65 were specific enough to warrant further investigation by the agency.

Subjects of Inquiry

Due to the powerful interest in mailing and traveling with foods, food handling (basically, the care of perishable items when outside the refrigerator or freezer) was the leading subject of inquiry. Nineteen percent of the questions answered by hotline staff concerned food handling. At 12 percent, safe food preparation was second.

During the 1990 holiday season, basic food safety issues were the focus of 80 percent of the hotline calls. More technical and regulatory subjects, such as product recalls, food labeling, and poultry inspection, were at the heart of 9 percent of consumer questions.

Foods of Interest

Thirty-five percent of all questions (and 41 percent of those regarding specific food products) pertained to turkey. Fifteen percent of the time, callers asked about several foods. Twenty-four percent of the questions were divided almost equally among four other categories: chicken, pork, beef, and eggs.

Call Management

Nearly all inquiries received during the period (94 percent) were handled by hotline food safety specialists, with little or no additional research required. Six percent of the queries taken were directed elsewhere.

1991: The Year in Review

Nutrition Education Now Part of Hotline Mission

Because FSIS is charged with protecting the public health through the inspection of establishments producing meat and poultry products, the hotline focuses primarily on the safety and wholesomeness of foods. FSIS also assures that products are accurately labeled, and in recent years the hotline has received an increasing number of questions on nutrition, particularly on those issues related to food labeling.

Recognizing the importance of interagency cooperation in the area of nutrition education, the hotline requested and was granted authority to answer basic nutrition questions pertaining to meat and poultry products. Barbara O'Brien, R.D., spearheaded this effort. "This procedural change had important implications for our service," she stated. "Basic misconceptions could be corrected. Food labeling could be explained with greater precision."

The hotline's nutritional guidance is based on the **Dietary Guidelines for Americans**, Third Edition, 1990. These seven basic principles are the foundation of all Federal nutrition education programs for healthy Americans.

Registered dietitians on the hotline staff assembled resource material and conducted inservice training sessions. "The boundaries of the hotline's responsibilities were carefully defined," O'Brien stressed. "Only basic nutrition questions would be addressed; no clinical or therapeutic nutrition information would be given." (Note: Eight USDA agencies have nutrition education responsibilities. The Human Nutrition Information Service is the lead agency.)

The hotline's expansion to handle nutrition questions was announced on October 24, 1991, in conjunction with National Consumers' Week. Nearly 200 nutrition queries were handled in the remaining months of 1991.

Callers Contribute to Food Labeling Reform

The hotline supported Secretary of Agriculture Edward Madigan's nutrition labeling and education initiatives. The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 requires mandatory nutrition labeling of most foods under the jurisdiction of the Food and Drug Administration. To assure uniform labeling of all foods, USDA proposed nearly parallel rules for meat and poultry products. The hotline in many different ways supported the Administration's goal of one set of sensible nutrition labeling rules to help consumers make informed dietary choices.

In 1991, only 3 percent of hotline questions dealt with product content, labeling, and dating. But these calls reflected a burgeoning awareness of pending rule changes. At FSIS' request, the hotline conducted a Nutrition Labeling Survey of 100 callers in August 1991. The purpose of the survey was twofold: (1) to learn more about consumer preferences for nutrition labeling of meat and poultry products, and (2) to learn more about the people who call the hotline through collection of basic demographic information.

Most of the respondents (78 percent) said that labeling describing the fat and cholesterol content of meat and poultry products would be very useful. When asked if they would rely on nutritional labeling claims alone or if they would also check the nutrition panel, respondents overwhelmingly (80 percent) said they would also read the panel.

Nancy Connor, one of four registered dietitians on the staff, believes that interest in food labeling will intensify during 1992 and 1993 as new rules are implemented. Said Connor, "The hotline is preparing now to help consumers understand and adapt to these changes."

Important Food Safety Issues

Safely Sending Food Gifts

Sending and receiving food gifts through the mail, a key point late in 1990, commanded attention well into 1991. In 1991, the hotline staff advised 500 consumers on mailing food to troops overseas, bringing the total number of calls on this issue to 1,900. Many more obtained advice after hours from a recorded message. Media coverage gave even more Americans this much-needed information.

Broiler Inspection

Controversy has surrounded poultry inspection since the mid-1970's, when FSIS began modernizing procedures to incorporate the latest scientific techniques and requiring poultry plants to be more accountable for controlling operations. In 1991, newspapers and television ran reports questioning the wholesomeness of chickens sold to American consumers. With this heightened media attention, the public—and hence hotline callers—became increasingly concerned about the ability of industry and government to ensure safe poultry. Home economists like Grace Cataldo were frequently called upon to discuss the inspection process and the specific steps taken by FSIS to reduce the risk of bacterial illness. Cataldo later commented, "Many hotline callers who at first were very concerned about these allegations were reassured when provided with complete information."

In 1990, the hotline witnessed a gradual increase in caller awareness of a pathogenic bacterium called Campylobacter jejuni. Campylobacter exploded onto the scene in the spring of 1991, when various television stations began airing alarming reports on poultry. The hotline handled almost 900 campylobacter calls in 1991. Points raised by callers became the basis for a new FSIS publication, "Campylobacter: Questions and Answers."¹

Until summer, callers asking about chicken focused on its link to foodborne illness. In the summer months, callers asking about chicken emphasized food handling (safe grilling, barbecuing, and marinating).

Foodborne Illness

As has been the case every year since 1987, callers were more interested in salmonella than in other possible causes of foodborne illness. There were nearly 1,400 questions on this topic. Consumers associated salmonella more often with eggs than chicken. (Many consumers are accustomed to using recipes calling for raw or lightly cooked eggs. With eggs implicated in more and more cases of foodborne illness, consumers remain keenly interested in safe egg handling.) In 1991, cantaloupe was linked to Salmonella poona infections; this unusual circumstance prompted additional hotline calls.

Noting an increase in calls regarding Listeria monocytogenes, another emerging pathogen, the hotline began to closely track such calls in 1991. This work became part of a spring 1992 Federal Government campaign to distribute information about L. monocytogenes to government agencies and private groups (especially delicatessens) serving those at risk.

Holiday Season

As always, the weeks preceding Thanksgiving were the busiest all year. Business hours were extended and the hotline was staffed to capacity. The hotline received fewer calls in November 1991 than in November 1990 (the height of "Desert Shield" calls). But in 1991, food safety specialists assisted more consumers during business hours than in 1990. Even though November failed to eclipse the previous year's mark, the hotline ended 1991 with a record number of calls.

The hotline's seventh holiday season was characterized by a back-to-basics movement. The staff was often asked to guide callers step-by-step through the preparation of a holiday turkey, integrating both time management and food safety principles.

The importance of these "turkey basics," the essentials that every cook should know, was most evident on Thanksgiving Day. Thirty callers made critical food handling errors which compromised the safety of the meals served. The common errors were (1) improper cooling and reheating of whole turkeys, (2) roasting at too low an oven temperature, (3) mishandling stuffed turkeys, and (4) leaving cooked or raw turkeys at room temperature too long.

Post-Thanksgiving questions covered a broader spectrum of food safety issues encompassing many traditional holiday foods.

Statistical Summary

Call Volume

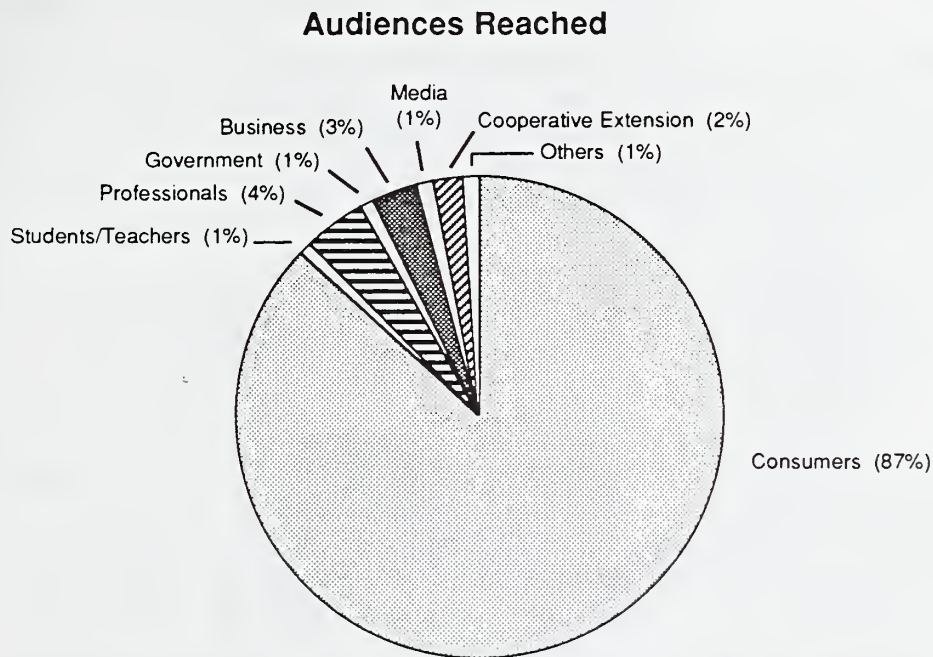
The hotline received 94,900 calls in 1991. During business hours, home economists and dietitians spoke with 42,000 people. Demand for the hotline's services remained high throughout the year. (To meet this demand, the hotline in 1992 installed new telecommunications equipment and added more telephone lines. As a result, next year's figures could potentially be much higher.)

Audiences Reached

Individual consumers were the principal users of the hotline (see figure 1). However, 13 percent of callers (nearly 5,400 people) identified themselves as part of some specialized audience. Constituencies identified were: professionals, business people, the media, government officials, including Cooperative Extension agents; students and teachers, consumer advocates, and legislators. Often these callers were actively involved in food safety education. Many were in charge of food service operations and/or serving at-

risk populations (such as the elderly). (Note: Media callers who contacted the hotline manager directly were not considered in the calculations for figure 1).

Figure 1



Questions from specialized audiences differed in some respects from consumer questions. Professionals and information multipliers were more interested in regulatory issues such as inspection, product formulation, and labeling. A larger proportion of these groups' inquiries were referred to other sources. (Referrals are a service provided to callers whose questions are beyond the scope of the hotline).

Anecdotal evidence shows that hotline callers are a diverse group, but the hotline does not routinely collect specific demographic data. However, the nutrition labeling survey conducted in August 1991 (see page 8) provided some insight.

Most respondents in the 100-caller survey were white females (84 percent female; 93 percent white). At the time of the survey, over half had some college training or a college degree (66 percent). About half were under 50 years of age (49 percent) and lived in a household with an annual income below \$35,000 (48 percent). A significant number of these respondents (39 percent) were following a medically restricted diet. Only 3 percent were receiving benefits from a food assistance program.

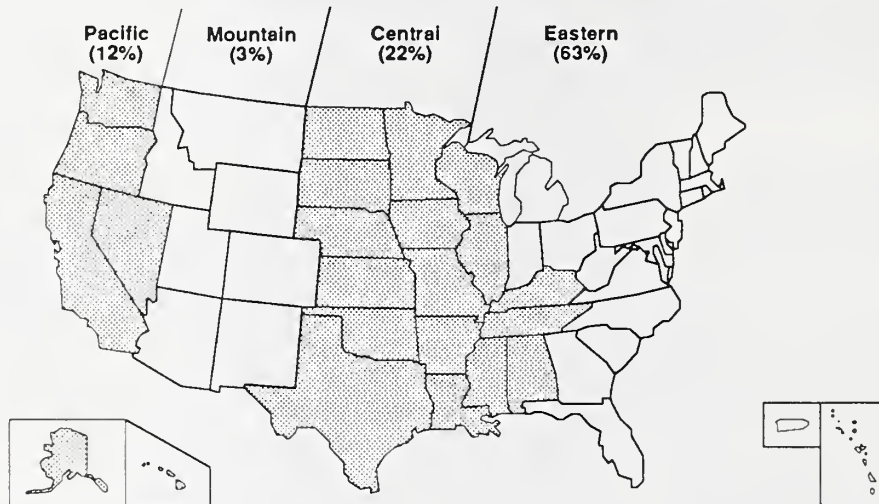
(These findings pertain only to the 100 respondents in the survey and may or may not represent the larger population of all hotline callers.)

Callers' Home States

More than half of all calls came from the Eastern United States, followed by the Central, Pacific, and Mountain regions. New York and California retained the top two positions, ahead of Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois. The hotline got calls from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and several foreign countries. (See figure 2.)

Figure 2

Hotline Callers' Home States

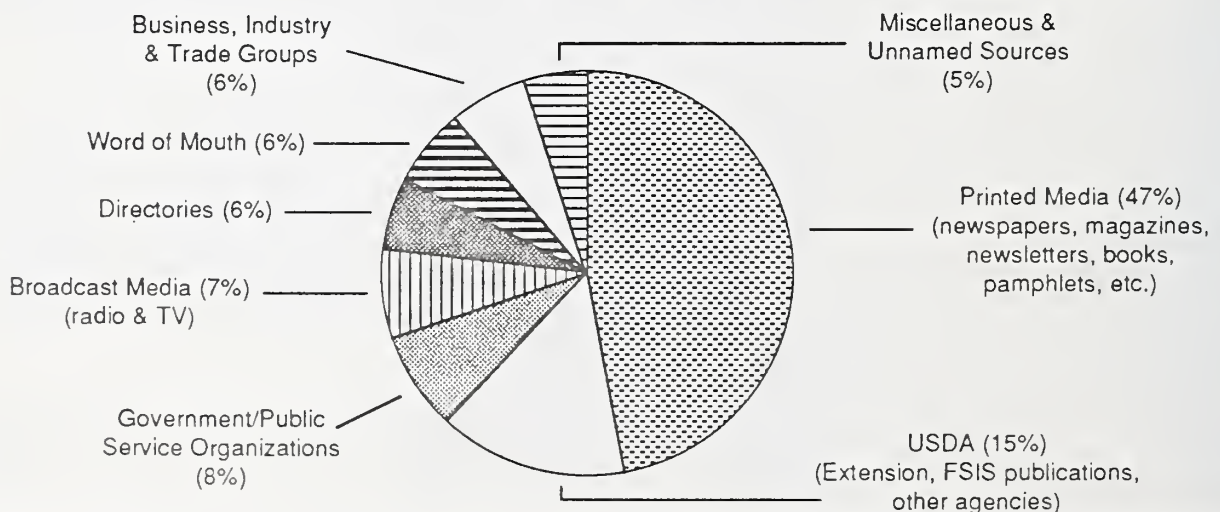


Source of the Tollfree Number

The portion of repeat callers rose from 20 percent in fiscal year 1990 to 24 percent in calendar year 1991. However, the means by which first-time callers learned of the Meat and Poultry Hotline changed little. A 1-percent increase in business/industry/trade sources was fueled by referrals from other hotlines. The greatest change was a 2-percent drop in calls traced to radio and television. (See figure 3.)

Figure 3

Source of Hotline Telephone Number: First-Time Callers



Types of Inquires

Complaints about food products reached their lowest level in several years, dropping below the 2 percent mark. Informal complaints, comments of a general nature referring to some condition in the marketplace, outnumbered formal agency-investigated complaints by 3 to 1.

Reports of alleged foreign objects were most common among formal complaints, accounting for 71 of the 159 reports. Sixty-one callers claimed that a meat or poultry product had caused illness or injury. These complaints were referred to FSIS' Compliance Division or Meatborne Hazard Control Center for investigation.

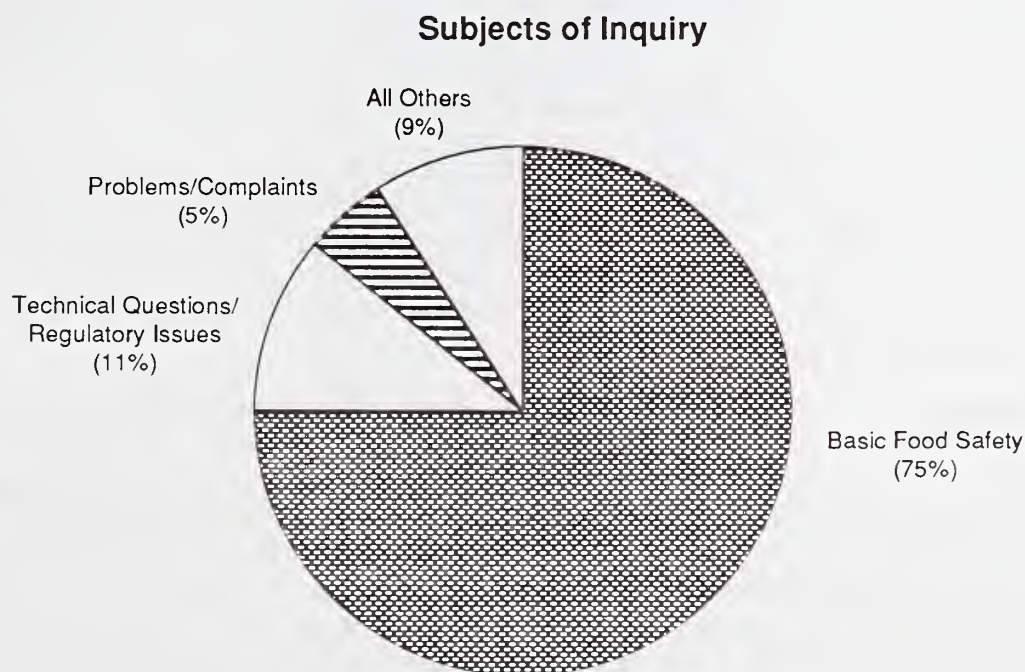
The informal complaints involved a wide variety of products, conditions, and policies. Many of these comments dealt with product appearance; for example, consumers found dark poultry bones unappealing.

Subjects of Inquiry

In 1991, most hotline callers asked how to handle, store, and cook meat and poultry safely. In fact, 75 percent of all questions handled pertained to these central themes (see figure 4). This has traditionally been the case, even though callers have increasingly become aware of specific foodborne pathogens.

Eleven percent of the questions dealt with more technical aspects of food safety, including government's regulatory role. The staff discussed meat and poultry inspection, product content, dating and labeling, agricultural chemical use, food additives, and

Figure 4



cookware and packaging, to name a few issues. The 1990's thus far have seen a variety of complex and multifaceted food safety issues, and the number of hotline inquiries devoted to these issues is expected to increase in 1992. "Food irradiation is an example," noted Katherine Bernard, hotline food technologist. "FSIS has proposed rules for poultry irradiation. Traditionally, regulatory activity has intensified caller interest in food irradiation."

Problems, complaints, and unusual situations accounted for 5 percent of hotline calls. In addition to the formal complaints, there were concerns about conditions in a grocery store or restaurant. Or the appearance, taste, texture, or odor of a food was not what the consumer had come to expect.

Miscellaneous topics comprised the remaining 9 percent of questions. In cases where the subject of inquiry was beyond the purview of the hotline, the staff provided the caller with an appropriate referral, thus enabling the caller to find the needed information.

Though questions covered a wide range of subjects, some overall tendencies were noted. First, inquiries often reflected myths and misconceptions, some of which predate modern methods of food preservation and packaging. For example, callers were under the impression that foods should never be refrozen. They often mistakenly thought recommended storage times for frozen items relate to microbiological safety rather than quality.

Second, questions often pointed to gaps in knowledge. When a consumer has heard only part of a food safety story, a review of the basics is in order. For example, a caller who has heard that growth-enhancing hormones are given to cattle may have little knowledge about FDA-mandated withdrawal times and pre-market approval of veterinary drugs, government and industry residue avoidance programs, and FSIS monitoring and testing.

Finally, the caller's first questions often served as a springboard, leading to discussion of other important topics. When a caller asked how much protein an average egg white contained, hotline staff learned that the caller's interest in body-building led him to mix raw eggs into a milk shake, a practice that could cause illness.

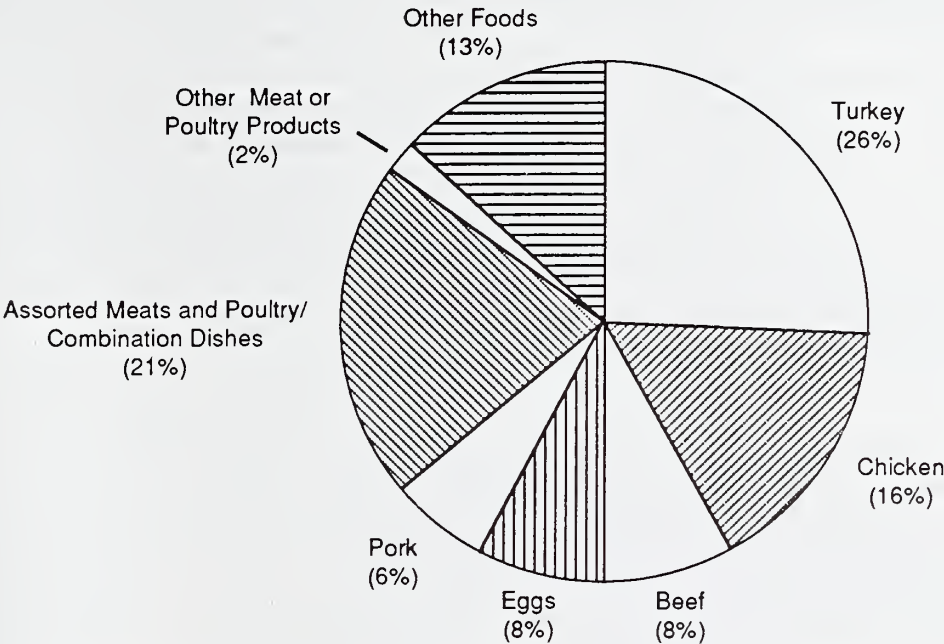
Foods of Interest

In 1991, most food safety concerns were product-specific. Seventy-nine percent of questions applied to a specific food or foods.

Five product categories—turkey, chicken, beef, eggs, and pork—accounted for 64 percent of these product-specific inquiries. (See figure 5.)

Figure 5

Foods of Interest



These same five categories topped the list in fiscal year 1990, although beef moved ahead of eggs in 1991. Egg questions have been steadily climbing since 1988, when reports of the *S. enteritidis* problem became commonplace, so some leveling off was expected. The hotline receives proportionately more turkey questions during November and December. However, interest in turkey was appreciable all year long.

Very frequently, callers asked about an assortment of foods. (In some situations, notably power failures, many perishable foods may be involved, and the principles of safe food handling apply to all of them.) A small percentage asked about other types of meat or poultry (lamb, veal, wild game, etc.). Although the hotline focuses primarily on meat and poultry products, consumers' questions were not limited to those foods. Of those foods not under FSIS jurisdiction, two groups—fruits and vegetables, fish and shellfish—were asked about most often.

Call Management

Eighty-nine percent of all inquiries were handled immediately by hotline food safety specialists, with very few (58) requiring further investigation. The number of calls requiring further research declined 71 percent from fiscal 1990 levels. The staff's knowledge base has broadened with experience. Also, continual improvements in intra-agency communication help the staff keep abreast of breaking food safety issues.

Eleven percent of the queries taken were referred to another office. Referrals to State and county Cooperative Extension offices, trade and industry groups, the Food and Drug Administration, and local health departments were the most common.

Nutritionist Cindy Roberts views these referrals as a hallmark of quality customer service. "The hotline strives to connect each and every caller with the office best able to serve his or her needs. When action must be taken by another agency with legal jurisdiction, or when questions are of a highly technical nature, the caller is referred." For instance, callers dissatisfied with the quality of meat ground at a local grocery store were directed to contact the local health department. Business people seeking label approval were referred to FSIS' Food Labeling Division.

Hotline Operations

Staffing

Hotline food safety specialists have diverse backgrounds. The staff includes nutrition and home economics teachers, public health and community nutrition experts, consumer advisors, microwave cooking specialists, food journalists, and registered dietitians with nursing home and hospital experience.

Currently, the staff size is 15. It includes the hotline manager, a management analyst, a senior technical information specialist, and five part-time technical information specialists. Seven more technical information specialists are on call to staff the line when call volume is high. At times, professionals detailed from other USDA agencies have lent their expertise to the hotline.

Profiles of hotline staff members begin on page 23.

Administration

The tollfree Meat and Poultry Hotline is a major unit within the Consumer Education office of FSIS' External Affairs staff. The hotline manager, home economist Susan Conley, oversees all aspects of hotline operation and serves as media spokesperson. A senior staff member directs day-to-day call handling, investigates unusual calls, and reviews complaints.

In addition to answering consumer calls, all hotline food safety specialists take on special projects. Each studies several contemporary food safety issues in depth. The staff is often asked to make speeches, help develop presentations, and write reports and articles on various food safety themes.

To develop food handling recommendations for consumers, the hotline works continually with other FSIS professionals—experts in the fields of microbiology, chemistry, meat and poultry inspection, food technology, epidemiology and foodborne illness, food composition and food labeling. The staff also consults with authorities outside FSIS: Department of Agriculture agencies such

as the Extension Service and the National Agricultural Library, food industry executives, and a network of scientists and researchers at universities throughout the country.

Trends in consumer inquiries are tracked on a daily basis by means of a computerized database. Linda Burkholder, management analyst for the hotline, reported, "Information analyses were used frequently in 1990 and 1991 to alert FSIS to emerging issues, uncover needs and opportunities for educational campaigns, and gauge consumer reaction to the latest food safety news." The database is also used to produce reports, including this yearly summary, for internal and external audiences.

Staff Training

All new staffers receive 2 weeks of formal instruction in food safety, food and drug law, and telephone skills. In addition to manuals, videotapes, and briefings, tours of slaughter and processing facilities equip the home economists and dietitians to effectively serve consumers. One senior staff member plans and coordinates staff training, but all staff members help conduct it.

Equally important is the regular inservice training received by all staff members. Ongoing dialogue with agency experts is one of the keys to the hotline's success. Inservice training and issue briefings keep the staff up-to-date on matters of concern to callers.

Media Relations

Promotional efforts to the print and broadcast media reached an audience of 500 million with information about food safety and/or the Meat and Poultry Hotline. In other words, nearly all Americans were exposed more than once to information generated by FSIS consumer education campaigns.

Hotline supervisors replied to an average of 60 calls from media and consumer affairs professionals each month. (In November, media contacts totalled 130). Information multipliers called on behalf of major daily and local weekly newspapers, magazines and professional journals, newsletters, radio and television stations, Cooperative Extension offices, other government agencies, and trade associations. Free-lance writers, notably cookbook authors, also used the hotline as a resource.

The means used to reach editors, writers and reporters varied, but all promotions described the mission of the hotline, its hours of operation, and Government sponsorship. Public service print advertisements, the FSIS magazine **Food News for Consumers**, and feature press releases were used to reach the print media.

Consumers also learned of the hotline through radio and television. At intervals throughout the year, video news releases on six different food safety topics were sent out by satellite. Television reporters filmed interviews based on conversations with the hotline staff. The Thanksgiving/holiday season and early summer were peak times for scheduling broadcast interviews.

Other Outreach Efforts

The hotline stepped up outreach efforts in 1991, accepting speaking engagements and attending meetings at the request of many different organizations. Chairman of the hotline's outreach committee, Marilyn Johnston, described the venture this way: "The goals of the hotline's outreach efforts are (1) to bring food safety information to the general public, and (2) to encourage professionals and group leaders to take advantage of hotline expertise."

Lessons learned in speaking to these groups were synthesized in a food safety slide presentation, which will be ready later in 1992. The slide show will ultimately be available as a videotape also. Diane VanLonkhuyzen, coordinator of special projects for the hotline, explained why this presentation was patterned after FSIS' "A Quick Consumer Guide to Safe Food Handling." "The 'Quick Consumer Guide' is the agency's basic consumer publication.² It identifies the critical points in home food handling where the wrong move might lead to illness." VanLonkhuyzen added that this tool will be "useful to other FSIS personnel—recruiters, inspectors, and public affairs specialists—who are often called upon to speak to groups."

The hotline was well represented at a number of national conventions. Hotline personnel were among the exhibitors when the National Association of Extension Home Economists (NAEHE) and the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) held their annual meetings. The hotline manager was a featured speaker at the AHEA meeting.

Two of the hotline's registered dietitians conducted a poster session, "Food Safety Education: The Meat and Poultry Hotline," at the annual meeting of the American Dietetic Association (ADA). Mary Wenberg, active ADA member and chief architect of this project, remarked, "Dietitians and other health professionals demonstrated

an increased awareness of food safety. Dietetic educators expressed appreciation for the hotline, the videocassettes 'Food Safety Is No Mystery' and 'The Danger Zone,' and publications related to foodborne illness."

Schools, service clubs, and professional organizations near FSIS headquarters in Washington, D.C. placed the hotline high on their meeting agendas. The staff took part in FSIS-sponsored Science Day activities for local middle school students. Hotline food safety specialists addressed groups of health educators, home economics teachers, senior citizens and homemakers. Most of those on the hotline are active members of at least one such association, and as such make sure food safety is considered in program planning.

The hotline served as part of FSIS' publication distribution system, sending out more than 23,000 publications in 1991. Publications were mailed to consumers upon request, and some bulk orders from service and educational groups were routed through the hotline.

Conclusion

The Meat and Poultry Hotline, as part of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, is committed to public health protection and total quality service. Food safety will undoubtedly be one of the high-profile issues of the 1990's, and the hotline will continue to deliver the latest food safety information to all concerned consumers.

Other future goals for the hotline are (1) to increase the number of consumers served by staff food safety specialists; (2) to identify new target audiences for food safety education; and (3) to serve these customers in the most timely and efficient manner possible. For more information, readers are encouraged to contact the hotline manager at 1-800-535-4555. In the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, dial 202-720-3333.



Meat and Poultry Hotline Staff

Sara Beck

Sara Beck joined the hotline staff in October 1990. In prior years she has been a consultant in the Washington, D.C., area in the fields of food, marketing, and communications. She received a bachelor of science degree in home economics from Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina, and a master of science degree in home economics and communications from the University of Maryland. She has worked as a home economist with a North Carolina utility company, nutrition advisor to the executive chef of the Pentagon cafeterias, and a home economist/consumer specialist conducting a nationwide consumer information program for the inspection and grading services of USDA. In addition to handling hotline calls, Ms. Beck continues her consulting work and is also writing a cookbook.

Katherine Bernard

Katherine Bernard received a bachelor of science degree in biology from The American University in Washington, D.C., and a master of science degree in food science from the University of Maryland. Her work experience includes 8 years with the National Food Processors Association (NFPA), where she performed examinations of exhibits involved in complaints against food processors. These analyses included bacteriological examinations of products alleged to have caused illness, examinations and descriptions of alleged foreign material, and food container examinations. Ms. Bernard is a professional member of the Institute of Food Technologists.

Bessie Jones Berry

Home economist Bessie Jones Berry has been with the Meat and Poultry Hotline since June 1986. She serves as front line supervisor, as well as the research and product complaint manager. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland, and a master's degree in consumer affairs from Howard University in Washington, D.C., that included an internship in the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. She has taught foods and nutrition courses in the public schools.

Linda Burkholder

Linda Burkholder is the Meat and Poultry Hotline management analyst. She began answering consumer calls in 1987 and now analyzes trends in consumer inquiries. For 6 years, she taught home economics in the public schools and has taught food preparation at the college level. She received a bachelor of science degree in home economics education from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and a master of science degree in home economics (nutrition education and human services) from Hood College in Frederick, Maryland.

Grace Cataldo

Grace Cataldo, certified home economist, received a bachelor of science degree in home economics education from New Mexico State University. She previously was a public health nutritionist in New Mexico and El Paso, Texas, supervising local WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) nutrition clinics. Ms. Cataldo demonstrated microwave ovens and small appliances in department stores and has given food preparation classes. She also worked 3 years for the Monterey, California, Independent School District.

Susan Templin Conley

As manager of the Meat and Poultry Hotline, Susan Conley is responsible for the activities of a management analyst and the 13 full-time, part-time, and on-call home economists who answer hotline phones. She serves as media spokesperson for the Meat and Poultry Hotline, is featured on radio and television programs, and is often quoted in newspaper and magazine articles. She regularly writes for the FSIS magazine **Food News for Consumers**. Prior to joining the hotline in 1985 as a home economist, she was director of sales for a food company. She also has 10 years of experience in retail store management and has supervised a USDA-sponsored daycare nutrition program. Ms. Conley, who has a degree in home economics from the University of Maryland, was a 1992 Kellogg Fellow at the National Center for Food and Agricultural Policy.

Nancy Connor, R. D.

Nancy Connor received a bachelor of science degree in home economics from St. Joseph College in Maryland, a master of science degree in education from Hunter College in New York, and a master of science degree in human nutrition and foods from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Ms. Connor is a registered dietitian. She is an adjunct professor of nutrition in the Department of Health and Fitness at The American University in Washington, D.C., and acting program head of the Dietetic Technology department at Northern Virginia Community College.

Marianne Gravely

Marianne Gravely, home economist, has been on the hotline since 1988. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics with an emphasis in foods and nutrition from Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. She has worked as a public health nutritionist, supervised a WIC nutrition program in Virginia, and was a home economist for the Yokusoka Naval Base in Japan. She is completing her master's degree in nutrition from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg.

Marilyn Johnston

Marilyn Johnston has been with the hotline since May 1987. Her background includes teaching home economics and serving as home service advisor to two major electric utilities in Indiana. She is an expert in microwave cooking, having worked for 12 years for a major microwave company. She received her bachelor of science degree from Purdue University, with a major in foods and business home economics. She is an active member of Electrical Women's Roundtable.

Patricia Moriarty, R. D.

Registered dietitian Patricia Moriarty has been on the hotline since July 1988. She has extensive experience in community nutrition education and health promotion programs. She previously worked for the National High Blood Pressure Education Program and was with the Greater Cincinnati Nutrition Council for 9 years. Ms. Moriarty has a bachelor of science degree in nutrition from Notre Dame College in Cleveland, Ohio, and a master of education degree from the University of Cincinnati. Ms. Moriarty is active with the American Dietetic Association as a volunteer for marketing, public relations, and media communications programs.

Barbara O'Brien, R. D.

Barbara O'Brien received a bachelor of science degree in home economics from Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods College in Indiana and completed her dietetic internship at Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, D.C. A registered, licensed dietitian, whose experience has been in hospitals and nursing homes, Ms. O'Brien has been with the hotline since April 1988. In addition to working on the hotline, Ms. O'Brien is active in the American Dietetic Association and Maryland Dietetic Association, and is also involved in the production of nutrition education videos for Montgomery County (Maryland) Community Television.

Cindy Roberts

Cindy Roberts received a bachelor's degree in anthropology and linguistics from the University of Texas and a master's degree in nutrition from the University of Maryland. She has lived in Mexico and Taiwan, studying the culture and language of those countries and teaching English. Ms. Roberts has worked for the USDA at the Human Nutrition Information Service, the Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center, and the Food and Nutrition Information Center. In addition to teaching English, she has also taught nutrition to undergraduate nutrition students. When not working on the hotline, she is an information specialist at the National Agricultural Library's Food and Nutrition Information Center, answering food and nutrition questions from consumers and professionals.

Diane VanLonkhuyzen

Diane VanLonkhuyzen, home economist, has a varied background in the field which includes a position as consumer advisor to a major utility company in the Washington, D.C., area. For 9 years she ran a test kitchen, developing recipes for the company's cookbook and conducting cooking and energy conservation demonstrations in the community. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen has also served as consultant to numerous appliance manufacturers. She has been with the hotline since September 1986, and has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen coordinates a variety of special projects for the hotline.

Mary Wenberg, R. D.

Mary Wenberg received a bachelor of science degree in foods and nutrition from Ohio University. She completed a dietetic internship and earned a master of science degree from the Ohio State University. A registered, licensed dietitian, her experience includes hospitals, university teaching, and school

foodservice. Ms. Wenberg was professionally employed in Ohio, West Virginia, Minnesota, and Texas before moving to the Washington, D.C., area. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association.

CiCi Williamson, C.H.E.

Certified home economist CiCi Williamson brings expertise in the field of microwave cooking to the hotline. In addition to answering consumer calls, she is a syndicated newspaper columnist and author of three microwave cookbooks. Her articles have appeared in **Food News for Consumers**, professional journals, and women's magazines. She has taught microwave seminars for 14 years and is a speaker at major food conferences. Ms. Williamson is past president of both the National Capital Area Home Economists in Business and the International Microwave Power Institute's Consumer Appliances Section, an officer of Les Dames d'Escoffier, and a member of the Newspaper Food Editors and Writers Association. Her bachelor of science degree in home economics education is from the University of Maryland.

¹ Single copies of "Campylobacter: Questions and Answers" may be ordered from: U.S. Department of Agriculture, FSIS Publications Office, Room 1165-South Bldg., Washington, DC, 20250.

² The companion FSIS publication **Preventing Foodborne Illness** is a more technical reference available to Extension agents, local public health officials, and other food safety educators. Single copies of both publications may be ordered from: U.S. Department of Agriculture, FSIS Publications Office, Room 1165-South Bldg., Washington, DC, 20250.

* NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LIBRARY



1022542700